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ABSTRACT

Two clashing positions about the social responsibility of educators and the main purpose of public schools are presented. According to the traditional position, the main purpose of public schools is transmission of a society's essential knowledge, skills, and values, which enables students to develop their capabilities to the fullest and to function effectively as learners, workers, and citizens. By attending to this traditional purpose of schooling, educators act responsibly toward their society and its members. The traditional viewpoint argues strongly against proponents of schooling as an instrument of social engineering in behalf of trendy views about equality, harmony, and justice. Social causes and reforms, promoted under the rubric of social responsibility by special interest groups with benevolent intentions, are discussed as negative influences on education in public schools. Emphasis on social engineering in formal education has led to decline in academic standards and achievement and has undermined core values and institutions that structure our society. A traditional approach to political education, based on rigorous study of history, geography, and constitutional government, is proposed as a means to properly attend to concerns about social responsibility in public education. (JP)

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The Social Responsibility of Educators: Critical Suggestions

A paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

March 1, 1986

San Francisco

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Apologia

Those concerned about education today tend to disagree about the main purpose of public schooling. On one side are those who see formal education in traditional terms, as a process of training each person in skills and useful knowledge, and instilling good manners and habits of self-discipline and work. On the other are those who would use compulsory education to achieve "social justice," on the assumption that we don't have a sufficiently just society.

At first sight it seems as if one could link the two sets of objectives, but in recent decades they have become almost irreconcilable. Traditional educationists think of American society in traditional terms -- personal freedom, competitive enterprise, economic efficiency, individual responsibility, patriotic loyalty. They cherish and exploit these values in the schools. Social justice enthusiasts, however, perceiving existing society as unjust, reject competition, personal responsibility, and self-discipline, and instead aim at creating new types of humanity in a new type of society.

Those who have risen to policy-making levels in American education in the past two decades are likely to be influenced by the social justice objective. Whether the average classroom teacher is equally influenced seems doubtful. I assume, however, that the sympathies of many, and probably of most, who are attending this convention are not primarily for traditionalism.

Being, as I am, a convinced traditionalist, that is, someone who thinks that the aims of formal education are necessarily conditioned by the society that sponsors the education, and that the

educators cannot and should not subvert that society, I am uncomfortably conscious that I shall offend some of you.

The Semantics of Social Responsibility

Social responsibility means, in my vocabulary, personal responsibility toward the society one lives in, and personal responsibility for fulfilling one's role in that society. That is how I shall use the term.

I am aware, however, that "social responsibility" has undergone an Orwellian transformation. In 1984 "Freedom is Slavery," and "War is Peace." Behind the Iron Curtain, "One Party Dictatorship is People's Democracy." In our own country, we have seen that "Racial Quotas are Anti-Racism," and "Moral Education is Ethical Relativism," and "Asserting Religious Freedom is Censorship," and, to come to the immediate point, "Social Subversion is Social Responsibility." Thus "Physicians for Social Responsibility" are dedicated to sabotaging the defense policies of the Western Alliance, and "Educators for Social Responsibility" aim at the same objective, by manipulating classroom teachers and school children.

This encrypting of language tends to encourage confused thinking. Teachers often see their work as "making a better world" and "changing human behavior" and "preparing the future." There is no harm in these grandiose aspirations, as long as teachers make sure that their pupils are also prepared for living in the present world, that is as long as teachers accept responsibility toward the society they serve and that pays for their services. But, when "social responsibility" becomes a code word for revolutionizing society, then hypocrisy, deception, and confusion will reign; as

indeed they did in pedagogic circles in the 1970s.

Perhaps this semantic chaos was implicit in certain peculiar doctrines that teachers seemed to acquire from education courses. The doctrine, for example, that the process of learning is more important than the substance one learns. Up to a point, this is obviously true, but it becomes absurd when it leads to suggesting that a person can teach mathematics without understanding mathematics. How often have I heard teachers, in response to the question, "What do you teach?" say: "I don't teach subjects; I teach students!" As if a doctor, when asked for a diagnosis, replied: "I don't diagnose illness; I diagnose patients!" And as if the doctor thought his remark had any meaning.

The effects of these pedagogic ideas were to treat formal education as a system of psychological manipulation rather than a rational process of training and student-teacher cooperation. The schools' task was the social responsibility of making a better world, and that task would be achieved by making the rising generation better than their parents.

Frances FitzGerald, author of America Revised, suggests that pedagogical experts are not concerned only with our unjust society, but with some deep flaw in human nature:

The propensity of educationists and school reformers to want to mold the character, rather than the minds, of children, however, derives from another syndrome. The assumption of pedagogy is, after all, that children are different from adults. From this assumption it is possible to proceed to the conclusion that children (even high-school students) are very different from adults -- weird, deformed creatures who require

salvation rather than simply schooling in history or English. While the Puritans believed that children were naturally sinful and had to be educated to virtue, modern pedagogues tend to believe that children are mentally ill. (The latest word on this subject comes from Paul Brandwein. "Above all," he has written, "a teacher heals." And, "In the social sciences, if nowhere else, a consideration of the child's development and mental health, within the purview of the meanings of civilization, is paramount.") Similarly, the study of teaching methods carries with it the assumption that children can and should be manipulated in certain ways. On this line of reasoning, it is possible to proceed to the proposition that the aim of teaching is to obtain as much control over children as possible. It is not necessary to proceed in this direction -- any more than it is necessary to believe that children are mentally ill -- but in practice many professional educationists and their critics have done so in varying degrees. Pedagogy, in sum, is not just a vague and confusing subject, it is dangerous to those who think about it for too long.

Frances FitzGerald, America Revised. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 214-215.

From Social Responsibility to Social Engineering

There is an underlying premise in academic and pedagogic circles to the effect that teachers are more humane, even more human, than other grown-ups. Consider Ernest L. Boyer's comment on the educational excellence movement. He made the remark in the course of a depressing symposium or "forum" held by Harper's

magazine:

This is a school reform movement, in short, driven by political and economic interests, not by educational and human ones.

("How Not to Fix the Schools," Harper's, February, 1986, page 42.)

There is, when you think about it, a certain arrogance about that remark. It makes one understand why the general public becomes frustrated over the state of our schools, and over the complacency of those mainly responsible.

The question that educators -- or rather, professional pedagogic experts -- don't bother to face is: "Why do pedagogues assume that they know better than other people how to make a better world?"

Let me submit a list of the reforms that educators attempted to impose on American society by direct suggestion to the rising generation in the 1960s and '70s. This technique is euphemistically called "social engineering."

1. First, and most laudable, was the drive against racial prejudice and discrimination. Unfortunately, this drive got out of hand when it led to busing to achieve racial balance, to affirmative action, to lowering of academic standards (so as to cherish the self-image of disadvantaged students), and to the denigration of Standard English.

2. The relative success of the attack on racism led to the cultivation of ethnic differences in the name of ethnic pride and cultural pluralism. This brought ethnic studies, bilingual education, the rewriting of American history, and thinly veiled attacks on traditional American values.

3. Reforming society called for radical reconsideration of accepted norms of behavior. "Middle class morality" was the enemy, along with religious sanctions, the "work ethic," discipline, self-control, and sexual restraint. So we introduced "values clarification," courses in sex and contraception, consideration of the attractions of suicide, and discussions of alternative lifestyles such as homosexual activity. (Did we draw the line at incest, bestiality, and necrophilia? What about child abuse?)

4. Educators considered that it was also necessary to attack the prejudice that assumes that differences between men and women are largely natural. The National Institute of Education supported research to prove that sexual differences are culturally induced, and to show the schools how to counter such tendencies. So-called sexist terms -- words like "goddess" or "manhole" or "mankind" -- were censored. In elementary textbooks, daddies did the sewing and diaper-changing. Small boys played with dolls and small girls with fire-engines (but not toy soldiers! God forbid!). Mothers extracted teeth or operated earth-moving equipment. And once again American history was rewritten. "Who controls the past controls the future."

5. We had to preserve the environment, too, and tell children the consequences of greed on the part of business entrepreneurs. The simple life of the aboriginal native Americans was ideal. The world, dominated by exploitive industry, was headed for disaster. (See Herbert London's book, Why Are They Lying to Our Children?)

6. Indeed, business and industry had to be exposed in all their immorality, so that the merits of government intervention and the virtues of labor unions could be extolled.

7. Finally, the schools had the inspiring task of abolishing war and especially of banishing nuclear weapons from the earth. This was to be achieved by teaching a topic called "Peace," and by explaining that all quarrels could be settled if only both sides would recognize their errors. This was called "conflict resolution"; its assumption was that there is no real distinction between justice and injustice, or between aggression and self-defense. We must not forget the trump-card of the peace teachers: scaring children into nightmares with visions of nuclear holocausts.

I have intentionally mentioned the major educational engineering experiments of the 1960s and 1970s. Nearly all of them were introduced for benevolent ideological reasons, and all were pushed by militant special interest groups, many of which operated at the federal level, nourished on grants from various departments and agencies of the federal government.

I do not suggest that every school district everywhere applied all these psychological levers to the students. It is my impression, however, that hardly any school escaped some of these temptations. I watched as all the textbook publishers incorporated all or nearly all of these social engineering devices in their increasingly "dumbed down" instructional materials.

What Were the Effects of these Experiments in Social Responsibility?

The list does not cover all aspects of social improvement that

came within the scope of the educational social engineers. One could mention the drive for student rights, the attempt to run schools on a system of "participatory democracy," the mainstreaming of handicapped, hyperkinetic, and disruptive students, and other experiments that I have forgotten.

The list is daunting. It reminds me of one of my favorite sardonic songs from Tom Lehrer:

We all hate Poverty, War, and Injustice;
Unlike the rest of you Squares!

To what extent these efforts reformed either society or human behavior I am uncertain. But I am pretty sure of one thing and that is that when a large proportion of formal education is devoted to social engineering, the traditional functions of formal education are bound to be neglected.

One obvious function of formal education is to teach the customs and manners of the society or community, and to teach them as a provisional but essential moral code. That function is necessarily rejected when education is directed to changing the customs and manners of the society.

Other functions of education provide the skills and knowledge needed to make a living and to serve our fellow citizens, to enable all of us to fulfill our potential as human beings who will continue to learn and develop throughout their earthly existence. If large numbers of students fail to learn to read or to compute; if they do not acquire the ability to concentrate on a job, to work without constant supervision, to postpone instant gratification; then the system of formal education is, to that extent, a failure.

Indeed, education that fails in these basic functions has

failed in social responsibility -- that is, in serving society and the members of society. The best intentions in the world for reforming society and remolding human nature are worthless when the rising generation's immediate need for skills and knowledge is betrayed.

I shall probably be told -- and I have been told -- that I don't understand the unprecedented problems of mass education through high school. Or that I don't understand how society is changing. Or that I fail to appreciate the collapse of community morals and the inability of the family to provide sound moral and character guidance for the young.

Perhaps I don't understand these things, but I see little indication that our educational leaders understand them, and still less know what to do about them. With all respect, I suggest that our public schools ought to continue doing the things that they can do and once did well, before they embark on creating a brave new world.

That our society lays certain unmanageable burdens on the schools seems clear. The problems of crime, teenage pregnancy, the breakdown of family life in many communities, and the disastrous influence of the peer-group in matters such as drug abuse or gang warfare -- these things can neither be attributed to nor remedied by the schools. I suspect that the only "educational" remedy for some of these chronic problems would be a couple of years of national service, with remedial schooling as part of the training. You cannot expect to defeat a social disease if the infection is renewed and reinforced during the greater portion of the victim's waking hours.

Political Education

My own position on the social responsibility of educators should be clear. The most obvious responsibility is to do our job well: to provide as efficiently and painlessly as possible the training that Americans require in order to be contributing and creative members of society and to make the most of their own lives. This includes the inculcation of community values and the cherishing of good character.

Having said enough on the general topic, I wish to devote my remaining time to a special responsibility of educators in a great and powerful democracy such as the United States: I call it political education. It is a challenge that has haunted me ever since my own high school days at a wonderful grammar school in England.

Bear with me for a moment of reminiscence. My last year at school was the year when Hitler's ambitions began to reveal themselves increasingly clearly and Winston Churchill was warning us all of our peril. During my undergraduate years the shocks came fast and furious -- the rearmament of Germany, the annexation of Austria, the Sudeten crisis and the Munich agreement, and inexorably, the Nazi-Soviet Pact and invasion of Poland and the declaration of war by France and Britain.

As a result of all this, I spent six-and-a-half years in military service, and lost through death half the friends of my youth. I am convinced by Churchill's argument in The Gathering Storm that the war could have been prevented by an early display of will and deterrent rearming on the part of the democracies of

Western Europe.

What troubled me then and still troubles me is that none of my excellent high school teachers explained the problems of foreign policy and defense, or hinted at the potential seriousness of our predicament. Even at University only one teacher -- a seemingly aloof historian -- really grasped what was going on. Leftwing teachers and students talked about the dangers of fascism, but none of them supported rearmament. (I was at the same college as Blunt, Burgess and Philby.)

Let me return to my high school experience. In my senior year, a classmate asked our teacher of current events what he thought of Winston Churchill. "Oh, Winston!" our bright young expert replied. "He is a funny anachronism -- believes in strategy and likes sticking little flags on maps."

I know the temptation for teachers to be smart. I've been there. I've argued with colleagues in the National Council for the Social Studies who are convinced that they understand defense policy better than the Prime Ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or the President of the United States and his advisers.

The other day, a parent told me that she requested a meeting of parents and teachers to discuss some questionable materials on nuclear weapons that were being used in class. The school social studies director was offended. "Do you mean to question the experts?" he demanded.

In the face of invincible expertise what can one do? Let me offer a moral instance from Robert Dahl's book, Congress and Foreign Policy:

In a poll taken before war broke out in Europe in 1939, the

Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues found that only half the social scientists in the United States thought an increase in the size of the armed forces was desirable -- whereas 75 percent of the public gave its approval. In retrospect it seems clear that the social scientists were making a policy choice less rationally adapted to achieving their preferences than was the general public.

(Robert A. Dahl, Congress and Foreign Policy. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950, p. 84.)

As Oliver Cromwell remarked when arguing with rigid ideologues in the Church of Scotland:

I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.

A realistic understanding of international politics calls for experience and maturity. It requires a strong sense of history. Since these qualities are entirely lacking in high school students, and not always prevalent among social studies teachers, I may be demanding impossibilities when I plead for sound political education in our secondary schools. Yet, if this is impossible, can the democracies survive in a world where dictators bide their time, waiting for the moment when the developed, free nations sooner or later let down their guard?

A Recipe for Political Education

What can a socially responsible administrator do when faced with this dilemma? I can only offer a few brief and possibly visionary suggestions.

In the first place there should be in every high school at

least one teacher with a grasp of recent history and political realities. That teacher should have contact with as many students as possible. He or she should be given an opportunity to keep up with official policies and knowledgeable criticism in journals such as Foreign Affairs, and should be on mailing lists from the Departments of State and Defense.

I stress these obvious points because I have noticed among education experts a vocational resistance to practical information on international politics. Extreme examples were in recent issues of the Harvard Education Review and Teachers College Record devoted to "nuclear arms." In neither magazine did any of the dozens of expert contributors explain -- still less defend -- the actual policies of their own government and its allies.

We cannot prevent teachers from expounding their own convictions in the privacy of their classes. But we can insist that one knowledgeable person be responsible for the main course in recent history, world affairs, and current events.

My second stipulation is that mini-courses on "Nuclear War" be eliminated. Nuclear weapons are merely a special, unprecedented conditioning factor in the complex topic of international politics. A course of instruction that starts from nuclear weapons is on the wrong track from the word "go." I would add that a teacher who is a convinced unilateral nuclear disarmer is as out of place teaching about politics as a flat-earth enthusiast teaching geography or a Christian Scientist demonstrating surgery at medical school. The propaganda distributed by the NEA, Educators for Social Responsibility, and similar groups is anti-intellectual and escapist; it inhibits understanding of international politics.

A third desideratum is effective instruction in the nature of democratic, constitutional government and its opposite, totalitarian tyranny. Students ought to understand the essential features of Marxism-Leninism, and especially the cynical amorality of dictators in Communist nations. I am not suggesting that we preach hatred of Russians or Cubans. Far from it! Russians and Cubans are victims of the oligarchs who run the governments of their countries. We must, however, recognize the real nature of those governments, and avoid the sentimentality that equates the motives and objectives of self-perpetuating Politburos and those of the elected, much-criticized governments of the NATO powers. There is a difference between imperialist aggression and national self-defense and between slavery and freedom.

At the heart of political education lie two great disciplines: history and geography. Our teacher should have a good grasp of these, and should convey enthusiasm for them to the students. The evidence of ignorance in these areas is very disturbing. I am reminded of the experience of a colleague during the Vietnam campus protests in the 1960s. A teacher of English Literature, he found himself stuck with a student-imposed "teach-in." On the great day he unrolled a world map before the class. "Let's begin by locating Vietnam," he announced. Ten minutes later, it was clear that no one in his class of twenty-odd students had any idea where in the world the subject of their protest was situated.

I hope that the geographic base from which the class operates will include an acquaintance with ideas like those of Mackinder and Spykman on the Heartland and Rimland, and concepts such as trade routes, "choke-points," great circle routes, Arctic air routes,

spheres of interest and influence, natural barriers, and the significance of outer space.

Similarly instruction in history should utilize analytic concepts such as power politics, balance of power, deterrence, imperialism, national self-determination, ideological conflict, economic interpretation of history, national interest, the Clausewitzian theory of war, strategic considerations, international law, diplomacy, arms control, and similar ideas that are essential to intelligent discussion of international developments. Neither history nor geography is mere memorization of facts, but rather a varying, debatable perception of relationships. Once young persons appreciate this challenging notion, their attitude toward these subjects changes from bored apathy to alert awareness.

Among the many analytic tools in political education, one of the most valuable is the use of analogy. By this I mean the comparison of a situation or predicament with earlier situations. It has been pointed out, for example, that decisions in American foreign policy are often influenced by the analogy in the decision-makers' minds. For example: The "Munich analogy" leads to the rejection of appeasement and compromise, whereas the "Vietnam analogy" suggests the danger of a strong foreign policy in a democracy where public will-power may fail. Or consider the clashing analogies of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis -- both in the short administration of John F. Kennedy. Or again, what lesson do we draw from Lincoln's bold decision to reinforce Fort Sumter, and so to precipitate hostilities with the seceding states? Should he have let the "wayward sisters depart in peace"?

I mention these ideas in order to remind you of the vital

importance and the tremendous educational interest of this responsibility of political education in our country and in all the true democracies in our time. My final word is a plea for serious commitment to this task and a warning against self-righteousness -- against the smug complacency that makes us teachers assume that we are more-loving-and-more-human than politicians, soldiers, businesspeople, and "hard-hats." For better or worse, we are part of this successful and imperfect society, and our first responsibility is to serve it and our second to help our students to understand it.

Postscript in lieu of Epigraph

What pedagogue has not demonstrated of Alexander the Great -- of Julius Caesar -- that they were instigated by such passions, and were consequently immoral men? -- whence the conclusion immediately follows that he, the pedagogue, is a better man than they, because he has not such passions; a proof of which lies in the fact that he does not conquer Asia -- vanquish Darius and Porus -- but while he enjoys life himself, lets others enjoy it too.

G. W. F. Hegel, "Introduction" to The Philosophy of History.